A Brief History of Buddhism in India - Part 1

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 56:12

One of the amazing things about Western culture today is that we have available most of the world's religions at our fingertips through bookstores, visits from teachers, and friends who have practiced in various traditions. Just reading through all the interview sheets on this retreat, I think we have most major schools of Buddhism represented, quite a bit of Hinduism, and very little Christianity or Judaism perhaps, but a little here and there. So you all reflect that multi-religious strain.

It's rare that a practitioner in the West today has practiced only with one teacher or in one particular lineage. I find it very awakening that we're subject to all these different influences. It hasn't been like that in Asia for a very long time, probably for over a thousand years since the schools have met and mingled in the way that they're doing now in the West. It's going to be very interesting to see what comes out of this meeting.

It's going to be a long evolution, obviously, because it's not just the meeting of the different Buddhist schools and Hinduism, but also Western psychology is part of the mix. So it's a wonderful opportunity, and at times I think it's also our curse as Westerners, because we hear so many things, we're drawn in so many different ways. Sometimes we don't take the opportunity to go really deeply in one school, but we gain a lot from hearing the different schools that we tune into.

The same was true for me. I started my interest in Buddhism in college by reading Zen. I then discovered Vipassana about four years after I got out of college and practiced that for about twenty years before I met Sogyal Rinpoche on his first retreat in California in 1993. And I loved his teachings from the very beginning.

Sometimes he would be like a playful twenty-six-year-old, which I think is what he was then. I'd be walking down the hallway and maybe I looked a little too somber and he'd reach out and tickle me in the stomach to make me lighten up. And then he'd sit up on the podium and the words that came were like a wise old sage. The Dharma was so pure and elegant.

So I really loved his teachings from the beginning, but it was a little bit of a culture shift, I have to say. I'd spent twenty years getting steeped in the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path and the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. I met Rinpoche, and two days later I was chanting 100-syllable mantras in Sanskrit to this golden-skinned deity who was primordially enlightened beyond time and space. That created a little bit of cognitive dissonance.

And so I said, well, what's going on here? Are these the same religion? Are we even in the same school at

all? And as I tuned into Rinpoche's teachings, I began to realize there was a lot more than just Dzogchen in what he was sharing with us. You can hear that in the talks today. He made quite a bit of mention of very basic concepts like the Four Noble Truths and karma and mindfulness, basically the Theravadan kind of foundation. And then he moved on to other topics that are connected with the Mahayana: the topics of emptiness, bodhicitta and compassion. And then he just touched or alluded to some Vajrayana teachings, Dzogchen-po, which we'll start talking about tomorrow, the allusion to the mandala practice and tantric practices. So he touched on all three strains today.

And as I came to look into how this all fit together, I understood what everyone has always talked about: that the Theravada teachings form the foundation, the Mahayana teachings are layered on top of that, and the Vajrayana on top of that. You'll hear that history in his teaching.

So I became very curious to understand how this had all come about and how it all got put together. And it led me to study and then touch on the themes that I want to talk about today and tomorrow, which are: how did we get from the death of the Buddha, the Buddha's Parinirvana, to the origination of Dzogchen? There's about a 1300-year span of history there as Buddhism evolved. How did that happen? What were the steps? What were the schools? What were the stages?

What I found as I started to look into this—one, I was completely wrapped with the history of it because I found that the things that people were arguing about 2,000 years ago are the same things we're arguing about today. If you notice discussions, heated discussions, sometimes debates among different schools of Buddhism today, I can almost guarantee you that they have gone on in the distant past as well. I mentioned this at one of our Spirit Rock teacher meetings, and Deborah, who's here on this retreat, said to me, "Yeah, and probably by the same people." So here we are, continuing the discussion that we may all have begun a thousand or two years ago.

So I found that I was very drawn to the study of our Dharma ancestors and felt a lineage connection to them that I'd never felt with my genetic ancestors. My family of Armstrongs came somewhere out of the border area of England and Scotland, and it's rumored that they were chased out of that area for sheep stealing, but I don't know about that. Ended up in America, and that history never interested me very much. But when I heard about the debates between the Madhyamaka school and the Chittamatra school and the early Vinaya disagreements, that was the lineage I could really feel in my bones.

So this is some of the kind of adventure that I want to share with you tonight, not just as dry historical fact, but because I think it sheds a lot of light on where we are in the West today and the kinds of issues that challenge us and stretch us as we open to the different views and the different schools that are alive in Buddhism today.

One of the frames that I'd like to put on this is that I believe that we have a great opportunity to hold these different philosophical views in a new light apart from the sectarianism of the past, that we can find common ground in our understanding of them. And to frame that, I'd like to read a quotation of the

Buddha from the Sutta Nipata, one of the early texts in the Pali Canon:

"This I do now declare. After investigation, there is nothing among all the views that such a one as I would embrace."

Seeing misery in philosophical views without adopting any of them and searching for truth, I discovered inner peace. For one who is free from views, there are no ties. For one who is delivered by understanding, there are no follies. But those who grasp after views and philosophical opinions wander about in the world annoying people.

So let's hope that we can refrain from annoying one another and use our diversity of understandings to enrich our practice and our approach to practice.

Another amazing aspect of Buddhism's history that struck me was its extraordinary reach. At one time or another, Buddhism covered almost all of what we now call Asia. It began in northern India along the Ganges Valley, and within just a few hundred years had spread throughout the entire subcontinent. From there it migrated west into Pakistan and Afghanistan—you may remember evidence of this from those magnificent tall standing Buddhas that the Taliban destroyed seven or eight years ago. Buddhism also journeyed north into Tibet and China, Korea and Japan, and spread throughout Southeast Asia. Much of Southeast Asia remains Buddhist today: Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos. The dharma reached as far as Indonesia, where you can still find the remains of that magnificent temple at Borobudur on the island of Java, one of the great Buddhist complexes in the world.

Virtually the whole of Asia was Buddhist at one time or another. Yet when you look around all those regions today, Buddhism has either disappeared or is in decline. It's sobering to realize that in places where Buddhism was once so strong, its influence is now waning. As far as I can see, the only places experiencing real resurgence are due to Tibetan refugees, who are changing the face of Buddhism in India and finding welcome homes in places like Singapore, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Otherwise, the outlook is challenging. The situation in Tibet remains difficult. Throughout much of Southeast Asia, what hasn't been lost to communism is in danger of being lost to capitalism. The Tibetan refugees, however, are doing extraordinary work to preserve and transmit the dharma.

Let's begin our exploration of Buddhism's evolution from the pivotal moment of the Buddha's death. The scholarly consensus places the Buddha's parinirvana at 463 BCE. A word about nomenclature: I grew up using the terms BC and AD, but in Buddhist scholarship these Christian-centric terms are replaced with BCE (Before the Common Era) and CE (Common Era), which correspond to the same dates without the Christian overlay.

What happens when a charismatic founder dies? People maintain harmony for a while, then they start arguing. This is exactly what occurred after the Buddha's parinirvana. The Sangha actually got along quite well for about a hundred years. Then reports began circulating that a group in the East was becoming

rather radical. They allegedly wanted to change the Vinaya, the monastic code of discipline, to allow monks to handle money—something the original Vinaya explicitly prohibited. This eastern group also rejected the claim that the Buddha's words were the sole authority for dharma understanding. Instead, they argued that personal inner experience could serve as equal authority to the Buddha's teachings, and that rational mind and logic could also guide dharma interpretation.

When news of these liberal views reached the elders in the West—the more conservative faction—a familiar tension emerged. Interestingly, in our contemporary American Buddhist scene, the roles are reversed: the West Coast is considered the liberal wing while the East Coast represents the conservative tradition. Yet the same fundamental struggle continues: How quickly should the dharma adapt to new cultural contexts? What should authorize such changes? Should we abandon traditional texts simply because a charismatic teacher claims a powerful experience that contradicts established teachings? To what extent should we remain aligned with a tradition that has provided a stable foundation for practice and understanding across 2,500 years?

This tension between tradition and innovation seems inevitable in all Buddhist communities and will likely persist for generations to come.

To resolve this ancient dispute, the western elders called for a meeting between the two factions. This gathering became known as the Second Council. To provide context: the First Council had convened immediately after the Buddha's death, when 500 fully awakened beings gathered to establish the authentic legacy of the Buddha's teachings. During that historic assembly, the monk Upali recited the complete Vinaya, the monastic code of discipline.

Another monk, Ananda, who had been the Buddha's attendant, recited all the discourses of the Buddha that he could remember. These became the collection of the suttas. So the Vinaya Pitaka and the Sutta Pitaka were assembled immediately after the death of the Buddha, and those became the formally recognized teachings.

The Second Council was called about one hundred years later to resolve the dispute between East and West. The dispute was not resolved. The Western group could not accept the innovations in the East. The Eastern group could not accept being compelled to follow the norms of the West. This was the first split in the Sangha.

The Eastern group became known as the Mahasangikas, the Great Assembly, the Great Sangha. The Western group, because they were more reverent of the past, became known as the Sthavairavadins. That's a Sanskrit word. The Pali translation is Theravada. Sthavairavada in Sanskrit means "the elders." Theravada is the Pali term, and that's what that school became known by. It has continued in one form or another to the present day.

Through all the splintering, altogether eighteen schools were formed in this early Buddhist phase, where

the canon of the Buddha's own words was the foundation and the shared understanding. The splintering continued to happen until at least eighteen schools were formed. Of those eighteen schools, only one remains today, and that is the school called Theravada. Some of the other schools were very influential and important. A lot of this has been lost to history. It's rather sad because there have got to be a lot of great stories buried there.

This tradition that I'm part of, that the Vipassana school is part of, is curious in one respect—very different from the Tibetan tradition and different from the Zen tradition. Let me ask you a question: Could you name three Zen masters from China or Japan in medieval times?

"Bodhidharma."
"Bankei."
"Dogen."

Great. There are many others, right? Hakuin and Huangpo, Huineng—the list goes on and on. Zen is a very literate tradition, beginning with Chan in China.

Can you name three Tibetan practitioners in medieval times?

"Milarepa, Marpa, Naropa."

And you could go on and on, right? The volumes are full of names of ancient Tibetan teachers.

Now, I address this specifically to the Vipassana practitioners—Tibetans are also welcome. Can you name three Vipassana or Theravadan teachers between the death of the Buddha and, let's say, the 1800s?

"Buddhaghosa."

Excellent.

"Shantideva."

Shantideva was Mahayana. Anyone else?

This is rather the state of things in our history. There's not a lot recorded. Buddhaghosa is the most famous. He wrote commentaries in the fifth century. A contemporary of his was another monk named Dhammapala. Another famous Theravadan figure is the person who brought the religion to Sri Lanka—his name was Mahinda. Beyond those three, it gets pretty sparse.

Our tradition is not very literate. There were many practitioners, because it's an unbroken oral lineage going back to 463 BCE—or even further, since the Buddha was in there—but not very literate. That's just how it was in our tradition. I think because there was so much emphasis on the words of the Buddha himself, later writers were not as valued.

The splitting continued to happen, and the development continued.

The next important development in the history of the Theravada schools was the assembly of what's called the Abhidhamma. This is the third basket, the third pitaka, alongside the Vinaya and the Sutta Pitaka—the Abhidhamma Pitaka.

If you ask a devout Buddhist in Sri Lanka, Burma, or Thailand how we got the Abhidhamma, they will tell you a story like this: The Abhidhamma had to be delivered uninterruptedly by the Buddha, but it was too long for any human being to receive. So the Buddha, in one rains retreat, ascended to Tushita heaven, spent the three months of the rains retreat there, and delivered the entire Abhidhamma to his mother, who was residing in that heaven realm. He taught her over three months in an uninterrupted fashion. During that same rains retreat, he projected his psychic body down to where one of his disciples, Sariputta, was staying. Every day he would give Sariputta updates: "This is the part of the teaching that I gave today in Tushita heaven." And Sariputta remembered it and assembled it during the lifetime of the Buddha.

Believe that? Western scholars say otherwise.

From my point of view—because, rather like the Dalai Lama, I believe in scientific research more than I believe in words from some old book—if scientific research indicates that any doctrine of Buddhism is incorrect, as the Dalai Lama said, we should toss it out. There's a funny little footnote to this. Carl Sagan was the one who asked him about this. Carl Sagan said, "What if we proved"—he's a great astronomer—"what if we proved that the doctrine of rebirth is wrong? Would you accept that?" The Dalai Lama said, "Definitely. If science proves it wrong, I'll accept that." And then he was still for a minute. He turned to Carl Sagan and said, "How would you prove that?" And Carl Sagan had no idea.

Western scholars have done a lot of research in this area. It's the viewpoint that I'll be presenting tonight. There are very different viewpoints in Asia on some of these questions, so I don't want to get into arguments about who's right—the Asian tradition or the scholars. I just want to tell you what the scholars say and let you make your own decision.

The scholars say the Abhidhamma was not assembled by the death of the Buddha. The first signs of its collection started to appear around a hundred years after the Buddha's death. The Abhidhamma is this amazing volume—actually, it's seven volumes in English. It analyzes in minute detail the workings of the human mind in an ordinary person and also along the path to enlightenment. It details how moments of consciousness come one after another, how the factor of perception arises, how intentions are born, how karma is generated from wholesome and unwholesome intentions, and how all of that can lead eventually to enlightenment.

It's an extraordinary work that had to have been put together by a very, very still and clear mind. It is associated in the lineage with the name of Sariputta, who was the Buddha's disciple foremost in wisdom.

Whether that is accurate or not, I don't know. Perhaps it was students of Sariputta who assembled it.

But there's an indication about the character of Sariputta from the story of his enlightenment. He came to the Buddha at the same time as his boyhood friend Moggallana. They were best buddies from early years, and they turned out to be the Buddha's two chief disciples. Moggallana was the one who was foremost in psychic powers. He got the teachings completely in a week. But Sariputta was slow. It took him two weeks to become fully enlightened. And it's said that the reason was that every time he had a new experience, he analyzed it completely to understand what factors of mind were there and what factors were absent and how it was able to unfold. So he had this amazingly analytical approach to his practice, and that's the spirit of the Abhidhamma.

It's extremely analytical and it maps the whole path from, let's say, a non-ego standpoint. It describes the whole thing in terms of elements that are arising and passing, considered by the Abhidhamma to be ultimate elements of mind and body that they called dhammas—things, little things. And these dhammas were considered irreducible. It's more or less the atomistic view of the Buddha's teachings. So these were called the ultimate. The dhammas were called the ultimate. Other names for things were considered conventional or relative. Things like "sentient being," things like "noble truth" were considered conceptual or conventional.

I think one of the things that happened is that the Abhidhamma tried to answer questions that the Buddha had left untouched in his discourses. As you probably know, there were a lot of questions the Buddha didn't answer, such as: How long does it take from one death to the next rebirth? In the Tibetan system, the answer is roughly forty-nine days. In the Abhidhamma system, the answer is zero.

The view they put forward is that as soon as the mind moment ceases in the being who's dying, in the very next mind moment it arises anew in some being who is being conceived. So they say there is no bardo, period.

The Abhidhamma, because it tries to spell out a lot of these unanswered questions, ends up getting the tradition in a lot of trouble, I think. It's interesting when you think back on what the Buddha taught and what he didn't teach.

You may know this famous story of the handful of leaves. The Buddha's walking in a forest with a bunch of monks, and he picks up a handful of leaves from the ground that have fallen to the earth—a handful of dried leaves—and he says, "Which is greater, O monks, the number of leaves in my hand or the leaves on all the trees in the forest?"

The monks are no dummies. They say, "Oh, Bhante, the number of leaves in all the forest is greater."

And the Buddha said, "Just so is what I know. The mind of a Buddha is like the range of all the leaves in the forest compared to what I have revealed to you. I have only revealed this handful of leaves of all that I know, but this handful of leaves is enough for you to become free."

He didn't teach about what wasn't conducive to awakening. There were many philosophical questions he could have answered, but he chose not to because it wasn't necessary. In the Pali texts, the Buddha doesn't even talk very much about what it looks like from the other shore—what the view is from the awakened mind—because he assumes once you get there, you'll know yourself. I don't have to tell you. All you have to know is it's the end of suffering.

So the Abhidhamma becomes a focal point for disagreements because it tried to fill in areas that the Buddha had, I think, wisely left unresolved.

One of these questions came up a couple hundred years later, actually in 250 BCE, about then. A very influential king had risen to power in India named Asoka, or Ashoka in Sanskrit. Asoka was the first Buddhist king in India to hold a wide range of the kingdom in his power. After his conversion—he was not Buddhist by birth, but he converted from his own understanding—he became a great patron of the Dhamma.

The Dhamma flourished under his patronage. You'll see this in the history of Buddhism: where there's royal patronage, court patronage, the Dhamma flowers. Nuns, monks, monasteries, nunneries are supported. When the political climate changes and that support goes away, Dharma dwindles.

So there was a great flowering under Asoka. He vowed to stop making war. He had been an expansionist, conquering, warring king. He vowed to cease attacking neighboring kingdoms. He outlawed animal sacrifices, which were very common in the Vedic tradition, and even tried to turn his court to more vegetarian diets. And he provided liberally for the people in his society.

There's a lovely teaching in the Dīgha Nikāya, one of the sets of the Pali Discourses, where the Buddha talks about why crime arises in a culture. And he says it arises because of poverty, because there hasn't been fair distribution of the material goods in the country. So Asoka knew that and tried to create a just and fair and generous society.

At the time of Asoka, there was another split brewing. And this one was over the question of karma. So everything arises and passes, right? We know that from the teaching on impermanence. So if your past action has ceased, where are the seeds of its fruit? It's said that when we act, those intentions become the seeds for future results, future karmic results. Okay, where are those seeds right now? Show me your seeds.

Different schools have answered this differently. There's a later evolution from the Cittamatra that tries to answer this in a different way. But a school sprang up around 200 years after the Buddha's death that tried to answer this. Their answer was, "Oh, the past and future aren't really gone. They actually exist here and now, along with the present. And that's how the karmic seeds and fruits get carried on. The past isn't really over."

This group became known as the Sarvāstivādins. They're one of the most influential schools of the early

schools of Buddhism. But the original school, the Sthaviravādins, or the Theravādins in Pali, couldn't accept this. They said, "No, impermanence is clear. It's one of the three characteristics. The Buddha said so. We reject this doctrine."

And the Sarvāstivādins split off. They were influential for a number of reasons.

One major doctrine that made them influential was their fascinating attempt to resolve the mystery of karma and how it operates across time. Another significant contribution was that they were the first school to systematically stress the importance of the paramis - the perfections. They developed the foundational list of six paramis that would later form the basis for Shantideva's beloved "Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life" and much of Mahayana thinking. These paramis are considered the very foundation of Mahayana practice, yet it was the Sarvastivadins who first articulated them.

Their canon was written in Sanskrit rather than Pali, and unfortunately, no complete copy has survived. The only complete canon that remains today from any of the early schools is the Pali canon of the Theravada tradition. While fragments of other school canons exist, none are complete - the Sarvastivada canon shares this fate.

Despite this loss, the Sarvastivadins wielded enormous influence because of their geographical position. Their power base was centered in the Kashmir region, having moved north and west from the Ganges Valley. There they established flourishing communities of practitioners, teachers, monasteries and nunneries. This location proved historically crucial because Kashmir served as the jumping-off point for the Silk Route.

When the Dharma traveled to Tibet and eventually through Tibet into China, it followed these ancient trade routes. Consequently, what was carried to Tibet was the Sanskrit canon of the Sarvastivadins, not the Pali canon. This partially preserved canon remains embedded in Tibetan Buddhism today. While there's substantial overlap when comparing their canon to the Pali canon, they are not identical traditions.

This historical reality has created an interesting situation. The Pali canon is not part of the Tibetan canon. I've heard Tibetan teachers claim they possess a complete inclusion of Hinayana teachings, but what they actually have is this partial Sarvastivadin canon, which shapes their understanding of what constitutes "Hinayana" Buddhism. Because these traditions were separated for so many centuries without dialogue between Tibetans and Theravadins, there has been limited cross-understanding of what's actually contained in Theravadan practice or the Pali canon.

So you may be relieved to learn that the label "Hinayana" doesn't actually apply to us Theravadins - it applies to this extinct school called the Sarvastivadins, though we certainly shared many philosophical views.

The establishment in Kashmir led to another fascinating development: this variety of Buddhism took root

in Mathura and Gandhara. Gandhara produced some of the most exquisite Buddha sculpture I know of. Here's an intriguing historical footnote - there were no Buddha statues until Buddhism encountered Greek culture. It was Greco-Roman sculptural tradition that provided the first inspiration for creating Buddha images. This cultural contact also produced other remarkable exchanges in the western regions, where King Menander, a Greek ruler governing parts of that territory, engaged with Buddhism. His name was rendered as "Milinda" in the local language, and the famous "Questions of King Milinda" records extensive dialogues between this Greek king and the monk Nagasena. This text now forms part of the Pali commentarial literature.

The Sarvastivadins developed their own systematic psychology, though being a Sanskrit tradition, they called it Abhidharma rather than Abhidhamma. They became deeply absorbed in these analytical teachings, which eventually led to yet another significant split with a group called the Sautrantikas.

"Sautra" is simply a grammatical variation of "sutra" - the Sanskrit equivalent of the Pali word "sutta," meaning discourse. So the Sautrantikas were literally "the people who believed in the sutras" - the original recorded words of the Buddha. Their critique was pointed: "We don't trust your elaborate Abhidharma. We believe you've become too fixated on these ultimate dhammas, taking them too literally and concretely. You've fundamentally missed the point. By focusing obsessively on these minute mental arisings and moments, you've lost sight of the heart of awakening - that transformative realization the Buddha was actually pointing toward and trying to cultivate in us." Their solution was to return to relying primarily on the sutras rather than the Abhidharma.

This philosophical tension resonates strongly in contemporary practice. You'll find in Theravadan countries today some teachers and practitioners who regard the Abhidhamma as the ultimate reference point. Let me share an example from my practice in Burma. I met a teacher there who was explaining the Tripitaka structure, saying: "Here's how we understand it - the Vinaya is for sila, ethical conduct; the Sutta-pitaka is for samadhi, teaching us meditation; and the Abhidhamma is for pañña, wisdom."

It's the liberating wisdom. So they held the Abhidhamma above the Sutta-piṭaka. Other practitioners—I confess to counting myself among them—hold the Sutta-piṭaka as the supreme source of wisdom above the Abhidhamma.

One of my teachers in Thailand, a great monk named Ajahn Buddhadasa, who was a wonderful scholar, practitioner, social activist in his way, and teacher, offered a unique perspective on this. Rather than translating Abhidhamma as "higher dhamma" or "supreme dhamma" as is standard, he said his translation for Abhidhamma was "too much dhamma." So he was more of a Sautrāntika in this ancient split that continues today.

These kinds of divisions and discussions persist in our time. The Abhidhamma is a dazzling intellectual work—I can't imagine how it was ever created. I don't think anything like it exists in any other body of literature. But its intellectual dazzle, for me, doesn't carry the living spirit of liberation the way that the

suttas do. Other people see it differently, and that's the beauty of this ongoing dialogue.

Around this same time, 250 BCE, while the Sarvāstivādins were splitting off from the Theravādins, a truly important movement occurred: Aśoka sent his son as a missionary to Sri Lanka. His son's name was Mahinda. Aśoka sent out many missionaries because he was a convert who believed deeply in the Dhamma. He had the resources and sent monks all over the known world, even to Europe to plant the seeds of Dhamma there.

I just heard something fascinating this past week—though I haven't been able to verify it from other sources. According to what I read, some Theravādan monks made their way to Greece, where they were known as Therāputrā—meaning "sons of the Theravāda," sons of the elders. This word Therāputrā, spelled T-H-E-R-A-P-U-T-R-A-E, became the root for our word "therapeutic." So according to this account, the teaching of the Dhamma was the original therapy in ancient Greece.

I don't know if this is historically accurate, but it's certainly intriguing. Today we have discussions about whether psychotherapy is the same as Dhamma practice or different, and here we might have the Dhamma as the original therapy itself.

While the monks didn't successfully establish lasting communities in Europe, they did take root in Sri Lanka. Mahinda established monasteries there, and within a few hundred years of his arrival, the body of teachings known as the Pāli Canon was finally written down.

For four hundred years, these teachings existed only in memory—they weren't written down because the technology for writing and storing books simply wasn't available. When the technology developed, the Canon was inscribed on palm leaves, four centuries after the Buddha's passing. So for four hundred years, it was simply memorized.

This is extraordinary when you consider the scope: the Sutta Piṭaka comprises about twenty volumes, the Vinaya Piṭaka seven volumes, and the Abhidhamma Piṭaka seven volumes. All memorized for four centuries. It makes you wonder about reliability—you know how when you play telephone, the message changes after just three people. Yet somehow we have this remarkably consistent and liberating body of teachings.

Initially, I didn't believe that such vast material could be accurately memorized. Part of the preservation system involved different sections of the texts being entrusted to different monasteries and schools, so each had responsibility for preserving a portion of the overall canon. This distributed approach helped ensure the teachings survived and were passed down intact.

But today in Burma, you can still find monks who have memorized the entire Pāli Canon. Personally, I think they might have been better served by meditating, but their accomplishment is undeniable. You can pick any sutta, any paragraph, ask them to recite it, and they will. They undergo examinations testing their textual knowledge. So clearly, this kind of prodigious memory is possible—people are still doing it

today.

The Pāli Canon was first written down in Sri Lanka around the first century BCE, approximately four hundred years after the Buddha's death. The significance of this cannot be overstated: Sri Lanka became the only place where the original schools of Buddhism survived intact.

In India, Buddhism was systematically wiped out around the eleventh and twelfth centuries by Muslim invaders from the west. Buddhism was vulnerable to destruction precisely because it was centralized—concentrated in monasteries, nunneries, and great learning centers like Nālandā. Hinduism survived because it was decentralized, present in every home, every neighborhood temple, every family shrine. Buddhism, being largely monastic and institutionalized, could be eliminated by targeting these centers, and tragically, it was.

All the other original schools of Buddhism were destroyed, their canons largely lost by the twelfth century. But the invaders never reached Sri Lanka, and there the Theravādan school continued in an unbroken lineage, preserving these ancient teachings through the centuries.

Through the centuries when Buddhism had effectively died in India, Sri Lanka maintained the Theravadan tradition in an uninterrupted lineage. That is why there is only one complete canon available today—the Pali Canon, which was first committed to writing in Sri Lanka over 2000 years ago. All the others were destroyed.

There's one other school among the eighteen that I can't resist mentioning. They're called the Puggalavadins. Wouldn't you like to be a member of the Puggalavadins? Puggala means "person," so these are the personalists. Their philosophical doctrine held that the self actually did exist to a greater extent than the Buddha had indicated. They said the person has more reality than the other schools were acknowledging.

According to the Puggalavadins, the self was connected with the five aggregates in a way that it wasn't exactly the same as the five aggregates—which are all impersonal and subject to impermanence—but it was almost like them and very closely associated. This self had some higher degree of permanence than the impersonal, impermanent nature of the five aggregates. So the self existed somewhere in between temporary arising and passing and an ultimate kind of nature. This was called the puggala.

When I was reflecting on this today, it reminded me of the "mere I." Isn't that somewhat like the sense of the mere I? The Puggalavadins held it in a more solid way than Rinpoche was describing the mere I—I don't think Rinpoche is a Puggalavadin! But this school had considerable appeal, and you can understand why. Isn't it comforting to think we really do have an I? Isn't there a little resentment of the Dharma for taking away our sense of self? The Puggalavadins restored it to us.

A visitor to India—one of the Chinese pilgrims who came in the seventh or eighth century—reported that the main early schools that still survived were the Theravadins, the Sarvastivadins, the Puggalavadins,

and the Mahasanghikas. Most of the others were of lesser importance by that time.

The Mahasanghikas become significant because scholars believe that it was from their philosophical leanings and attitudes that the Mahayana evolved. This is what I want to explore starting tomorrow: the origination of the Mahayana, the evolution of its schools, and then the later development of the tantras and the Vajrayana.

Rinpoche is spending the first couple of days laying a conceptual framework before we move into meditation. I'm following the same approach—establishing the framework of the teachings and the links between traditions. Then, as he moves into more meditation instruction, I'll also shift toward more meditation guidance in these evening talks.

Tomorrow I want to complete the story of Buddhism's evolution in India. I won't venture into China and Japan, as that's an entirely different subject. But I love the Indian story because you see there the common foundation of Theravada and Tibetan Buddhism.

I feel these two schools have great affinity. I've benefited tremendously from exposure to both Theravadan and Tibetan teachings. The wonderful thing is that we can sit down and have meaningful dialogue together. If I tried to discuss with a Zen master where the seeds of karma are stored, he'd probably just hit me! But with someone like Rinpoche, I can ask such questions and engage in logical discussion.

I believe this is because both Theravada and Tibetan Dharma are grounded firmly in Indian Buddhism and remain strongly connected to that foundation. We share common philosophical underpinnings, which enables very comfortable dialogue between our traditions.

I think that's all I wanted to cover tonight. You're tired, and you've been a wonderfully patient audience. We'll take a couple of questions or comments if you have any. Obviously, we could discuss these topics all night, but I won't keep you long. Please, if there are any brief questions or comments?

A question about the distinction between direct and gradual paths... Could you give an example of what you mean by direct?

The comment refers to Dzogchen being described as a direct path while the Theravadan path is characterized as gradual. I've also heard it said within the Tibetan tradition that there's a sutra path considered gradual, while Dzogchen is considered more direct. This isn't an area I know extensively, so it might be better to ask Rinpoche about it.

I will discuss tomorrow the birth of the tantras—of which Dzogchen is one practice—and the foundational attitude in the tantras. That will give a taste of this directness, but I'll save that exploration for tomorrow.

Faith and Questions

"What's your faith in me?" The comment was that Nagarjuna may be claimed by both the Mahayanas and the Theravadans. I agree. I'm going to talk about Nagarjuna tomorrow night. His central work, the *Mula Madhyamaka Karika*, Root Verses on the Middle Way, has almost no uniquely Mahayana vocabulary. Virtually the whole vocabulary is in terms of language that the Buddha himself used. So it fits very well in the Theravadan line of understanding.

Understanding the Abhidhamma

The question is about the proper understanding of the Abhidhamma. It's definitely acknowledged that the things that are called the ultimate truths are impermanent and arising and passing. The practitioners of Abhidhamma were saying that these things called ultimates were actually just the ultimate in experience. They said that they were conditioned phenomena, but that they were, this is as far as we could go in experiencing them.

I've always kind of bristled a little when I hear people say, "Oh, you know, they're making it atomistic and they're saying these things are ultimate." I think what happened was that some later practitioners made more of the Abhidhamma than was inherent in it. I think there's a way to hold the Abhidhamma model in a wise light where there's no conflict with the suttas in any way.

But I think that what happened was that later philosophers and practitioners became so fixated on the reality of, for instance, just these fifty-two mental factors. There are only fifty-two mental factors in the Abhidhamma view, no more and no less states of mind. And other kinds of parsing of reality—no moment can touch another. Mind moments are all discrete and they cannot overlap or contact one another. They're said to be discrete.

Nagarjuna's Response

So it's actually on the basis of those kinds of what I would call rigid views—or views too rigidly held—that Nagarjuna mounted his counterattack. Nagarjuna's counterattack was basically to people who were taking the Abhidhamma too literally and fixating a view that this was the only way to view reality. And in doing that, they had lost touch with the essentially empty nature of designations.

So all the things that the Abhidhamma describes, I think we have to hold as merely descriptions of reality. And when it gets taken too seriously, it's held as constituting reality. So I think that's the critique.

Okay, I'm going to liberate you for tonight. We have about half an hour for walking, stretching, and then we'll come back at nine o'clock for our last sitting of the day. Thank you.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.